

National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria - publicly recognized and statutory voice of Bulgarian municipalities



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The Program supports the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB) in strengthening its role as a publicly recognized and statutory voice of Bulgarian municipalities, advancing local government legislative agenda, and assisting member-municipalities in improving their administrative and policy-making capacity.

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Introduction

In 2001, the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB) initiated a Program funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), to assist Bulgarian municipalities in improving their administrative and policy-making capacity.

The activity had four priority areas:

Priority Area I: *Promoting sustainable partnership between local and central authorities to encourage legislative improvements and government decentralization.*

The main tasks under this priority were related to developing a legislative agenda of the Association; establishing a municipal lobby in the National Assembly; organizing advocacy and lobbying campaigns in support of NAMRB's legislative agenda; Improving the competence of local government authorities in the preparation and adoption of enabling legislation through training, discussion forums, and direct technical assistance; initiating and maintaining dialogue with central government authorities (ministries, agencies) in accordance with framework agreements and procedural rules on consultations.

Priority Area II: *Working towards wide public understanding and support of local self-governance issues.*

The main tasks under this priority were related to implementing various activities to increase the transparency of local government, such as inter-municipal forums, media campaigns, focus-group discussions, direct technical assistance to member-municipalities, etc; organizing training seminars for mayors and chairs of municipal councils on effective media relations; Organizing training seminars for municipal communication officers on "Effective media presentation"; organizing training seminars on local government issues for journalists from national and regional media.

Priority Area III: *Strengthening the administrative and policy-making capacity of local governments*

The main tasks under this priority were related to implementing training activities in the following priority areas: municipal finance; urban development; municipal property management; legislative framework of local government activities; public works management; cadastre; EU-accession related issues. Priority have been given to municipalities which are not members of a regional association; expanding the portfolio of expert services (legal, technical, consulting, information) provided by NAMRB to

member-municipalities; publishing bi-weekly NAMRB Information Newsletter (1500 copies); developing and publishing a handbook for newly elected mayors and chairs of municipal councils; providing information and technical assistance to member-municipalities related to their participation in EU pre-accession programs and other donor funded programs.

Priority Area IV: Strengthening the self-sustainability, efficiency and institutional capacity of the Association.

The main tasks under this priority were related to elaborating and implementing a five-year strategy for financial self-sustainability of the Association; training newly elected members of the NAMRB Board and Control Council; training NAMRB staff members in various aspects of association management; participating in joint activities of the partner network of national associations of municipalities from South-Eastern European countries; further developing partnerships with associations of local authorities from EU and USA.

In 2003, NAMRB expanded the Program to include ***Priority area: Implementing Fiscal Decentralization in Bulgaria.***

In 2006, USAID approved and funded NAMRB's proposal to co-fund the ongoing renovation of NAMRB's newly acquired training center in the village of Girgini near Gabrovo. The increasing interest in the services provided by NAMRB, along with its achievements over the last ten years, enables the Association to enter a new stage in its institutional development. ***The Association was renovating a Training Center for Local Authorities*** where local government officials and employees will: acquire practical knowledge on the effective work of the municipal council and administration; further develop their professional experience; and undergo training under specific projects.

This report outlines the activities conducted during the life of the Agreement. Through examples and analyses, this report informs, illustrates, and provides a basis to form an opinion about the implementation of activities and our achievements.

Background

All 264 municipalities in Bulgaria joined the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria following the principles of voluntary participation and equity.

Eleven years:

- ✧ NAMRB represents and advocates for the Bulgarian local authorities' interests;
- ✧ NAMRB works for strong and efficient self-governance for the benefit of citizens;
- ✧ The Association is simultaneously “the voice” of all Bulgarian municipalities and a center for provision of services to them, reliable partner of central authorities and valued representative of Bulgarian municipalities before local authorities in Europe.

Pursuant to the Local Self-governance and Local Administration Act, for the National Association of Municipalities to be recognized as a legitimate representative of local authorities and have the right to defend their interests, two thirds of all municipalities in Bulgaria have to be its members.

In 1996 the establishment of the NAMRB was supported by one third of all municipalities.

By mid 1997 two-thirds of the municipalities were already its members, whereupon the Association acquired the right to fully implement its powers as a representative of local authorities in Bulgaria.

Two years later, in 1999, all 264 municipalities joined their will and power in one association to work together for the implementation of the principles of local democracy in Bulgaria.

Democratic rules of organization and activity

Democracy and equity, putting the common interest above the individual, applying fair practices and finding practical solutions are the principles that govern the activity of the National Association of Municipalities.

The direction of development and activities of the NAMRB are governed by democratically elected bodies:

The General Assembly: It defines the strategic priorities of the organization, the short term objectives and the ways to achieve them. According to the last change in the Statute of the Association in 2007, each municipality has two representatives with voting rights in the General Assembly – the mayor and a representative of the Municipal Council.

The Board of Directors: The supreme body of the Association, the GA elects the 23 members and the chair of the Board of Directors of NAMRB for a four-year term. The members elect among themselves three Vice Presidents.

The Control Council comprises 5 members elected by the General Assembly for a four-year term.

The Standing Committees of the Association have as their basic task to prepare expert proposals for legislative improvement in certain areas of municipal activity as well as to establish and disseminate best practices in them. Committees are established based on the self-determining principle – each municipality decides in which committee to participate and which representatives to send. The management and activity of the commissions are fully decentralized – each committee elects its leadership, rules of procedure and work agendas.

The democratic internal procedures of the Association provide for the wide participation of municipalities and competitiveness of different ideas and proposals in the process of forming common opinions and positions of the Association.

The daily communication with municipalities is a prerequisite for the usefulness and efficiency of the Association's work.

The Local Self-governance and Local Administration Act recognizes the role of the National Association as a representative and advocate of municipal interests and is a legal guarantee for its functioning. 17 more other legal acts provide for certain powers of the NAMRB.

Sustainable partnership between local and central authorities

Cooperation with the central executive and legislative authorities

The transition from a monologue and confrontation to a lasting institutional dialogue

We learned from experience to seek and use all forms of cooperation with the central executive and legislative authorities to achieve better conditions for the work of municipalities.

The National Association resorted to a wide variety of practices, diverse in their form and nature to defend and lobby for the interests of municipalities before the central government has provided as successful and efficient during the years.

□ The Day of Dialogue – an effective partnership practice between the central legislative authority and local authorities

Since 1998 the National Association for Municipalities has introduced a new and unfamiliar for Bulgaria form of interaction between legislative authorities and local government – the Day of Dialogue.

Every year in September, on the same day on the whole territory of the country, in all 28 municipalities, district centers MPs, mayors, municipal councilors and experts, NGOs media and citizens meet. At these meetings taking place under identical agendas, prepared with well-grounded materials by NAMRB, legislative change expected by the municipalities for the next year have been discussed. The topic for each Day of Dialogue that reflected the local self-government during the years were as follows:

2001 – Enlargement of the resource opportunities of municipalities;

2002 – 2003 – Actual start of the financial decentralization;

2005 – Financial decentralization – how to become reality;

2006 – The new Mandate of local authorities – with a new legislative development of local self-governance and decentralization.

The major and most important result of the annual organization of the Day of Dialogue was the established tradition of open and fair discussion, which allowed for a better

understanding of the positions of both parties. The MP's have been informed in detail about municipal problems, presented according the specifics of the particular election district, while municipalities get acquainted with national priorities and forthcoming tasks. The results of the debates have been summarized and adopted by the NAMRB Board of Directors and become the basis of the NAMRB activity Agenda in the coming year.

□ **The Agreement for Cooperation with the Council of Ministers – a key to future successful partnership**

*The institutional cooperation between local and central government was based on the **Agreement for Cooperation with the Council of Ministers**, defining the major directions for joint work during the mandate of the Government.*

At the beginning of the term of office of each new Government, the NAMRB initiated meetings with the leaderships of different ministries, where the potential spheres of cooperation, procedures of interaction, as well as specific work program were outlined.

The first Agreement between the Council of Ministers and the NAMRB was signed in **December 2001**. It could be defined as an important success for the institutionalization of the dialogue between central and local authorities that ensured the **start of the financial decentralization process and guaranteed the involvement of municipalities in the EU integration process**.

In October 2005 an Agreement for Cooperation with the new government of the Republic of Bulgaria was signed. The document had two major objectives: to secure provision of efficient public services that met the needs and expectations of the citizens on the one hand and to guarantee that Bulgaria became a reliable and equal member of EU.

What we have learned from experience is that it is important to monitor the implementation of commitments undertaken by both parties as they are specified in a clearly developed **Annual program** with defined terms and responsible bodies.

The Contract groups of the NAMRB for cooperation with different ministries played an important role for ongoing coordination and effective implementation of the task defined by the Agreement with the Government. The Association in 2001 imposed this practice as partnership teams continued their work. Their composition was elected at national discussion forums where the contact groups obtained also a **mandate for negotiations based on clear common positions in certain fields – education, social activities, culture, etc.**, that should be updated and amended with valuable ideas of the NAMRB Standing committees.

On this basis good results were achieved in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Ministry of Culture, etc.

One of the important achievements in the dialogue between the municipalities and the Government was the establishment of the **Council for Decentralization** – the first body in which the local and central authorities participated on a parity principle. The mayor task of the council was the implementation of the measures and tasks stated in the Decentralization Agenda.

□ **Financial negotiations with the Ministry of Finance on the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria in its part concerning municipalities**

During the consultations with the Ministry of Finance on the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria in its part concerning municipalities, the NAMRB accumulated rich and useful experience in protecting the municipal interests in the most areas – financial relations between central and local authorities.

The consultations were regulated pursuant to the Local self-government an Local Administration Act and the Municipal Budgets Act, according to which NAMRB, being a legal representative of all municipalities, entitled on their behalf and best interest to negotiate with the Ministry of Finance for achieving the best conditions for municipalities during the coming year.

The dialogue between central and local authorities in drafting and implementation of the municipal budgets were held at two levels – political and expert.

Calendar of negotiations and consultations:

February – May – proposals from the municipalities were summarized;

May – June – parameters and accents in the negotiations on the next year budget during the National conference of municipal financial officers were defined;

June – the NAMRB submitted to the Ministry of Finances a well-grounded proposal concerning the total size of relations between municipal budgets and state budget;

September – October – consultations between the NAMRB and the MF initially at expert, and then at political level. The Association presented its well-grounded opinion on the draft budget with specific proposals for its improvement. Following the negotiations between the NAMRB and the MF, a Protocol was signed on reflected disagreements on the draft SBRBA for the relevant years in its part municipalities.

November – the Minister of Finances submitted to the Council of Ministers the draft SBRBA together with the Protocol signed with the NAMRB. Thus the protocol became a

part of the documentation package that the Council of Ministers submitted for debate at the National Assembly.

December – In the Parliament lobbying was held. The NAMRB representatives participated in the budget debate at the meeting of the Parliamentary committees and by their “municipal lobby” ensured that general proposals were included in the draft state budget act.

Important conditions for successful financial negotiations:

Bilaterally approved Rules for financial consultations and negotiations between the NAMRB and the MF that specify all procedures, stages and needed informational exchange.

Signed Three-year Agenda for effective integration between the MF and the NAMRB that determined the tasks for joint elaboration and coordination.

Joint activity for the implementation of the agreements achieved – annually the NAMRB with expert support by the MF prepared a **Consultative work on preparation and implementation of the municipal budgets** during the next year. This was the most sought after and expected product of the Association applied immediately in municipal practice. Teams of trainers from the NAMRB and the MF used this material to train municipal finance officers on implementation of tasks, priorities and new regulations on financial management in the relevant budget year. Thus the administrative capacity of municipalities to prepare and implement successfully their budgets was continuously developed.

Benefits for both sides – The MF has at its disposal specific proposals and works that assisted their activity while at the same time “get rids” of significant volume of work with each municipality. The NAMRB succeeded in including the proposals from municipalities in the draft budget and undertook the commitment to inform and disseminate among municipalities the results achieved.

□ **The representation in different consultative and intergovernmental bodies – a guarantee for the protection of municipalities interests**

The NAMRB representative in different consultative, steering and monitoring bodies defend the common proposals of municipalities in the respective areas, thus guaranteed that the interests of local authorities were protected.

The NAMRB Board of Directors appointed the representatives of the Association that worked under clearly defined internal rules. The participation of NAMRB representative in a working group or other events was preceded by preparation, including collecting proposals from the municipalities, the NAMRB Standing Committee, focus groups, etc.

The overall number of NAMRB representative in the different bodies **exceeded 260 participants in:**

Ψ Different consultative bodies at the Council of Ministers and various Ministers:

Due to powers provided under different laws, the Association has its representatives over 40 Standing Intergovernmental working groups and Committees – Council for Decentralization, the Council on EU communication, the National Council on ethnic and demographic affairs, the High Consultative Council on waters, the National Expert Council on Territorial Regulation and Regional Policy, the National Council on Forestry Protection, Council for Social Assistance, etc.

Ψ Management Councils and Monitoring Committees:

Representatives, nominated by the municipalities, participated in the Monitoring Committee on the implementation of all 7 Operational Programs as well as National programs supporting municipal projects in the filed of education, environment and social activities

Ψ Joint working groups with long term/standing or short term mandate:

Jointly with the central government, these groups were involved in activities on the implementation of new amended regulations. At the meetings of the WG the representatives of the respective state institutions presented and discussed the particular aspects of its implementation with local authorities. The results are useful not only for the municipalities but also for the central authorities.

Encouraging legislative improvements

Legislative changes could only be achieved by involvement in the process – from the expert elaboration of the departments to the debates in the Parliament

The participation of NAMRB representatives in the preparation and implementation of legislation is really guaranteed.

In order to focus the joint efforts in the directions of the changes, the NAMRB General Assembly adopted a Legislative Agenda of the Association, where the priorities of the Association for a certain period were set up.

The Agenda took into consideration both the **legislative priorities of the Government and proposals of the municipalities**. It provided a foundation for the association in preparing drafts for changes in the regulatory framework pertaining to the municipalities or positions and opinions on specific legal acts.

According to the practice established during the years, the relevant ministries and standing Parliamentary committees addressed the NAMRB to invite the **Association to participate in the preparation of draft legal acts directly concerning the activities of municipalities**. The involvement of municipality representatives was exclusively useful in the stage of **clarifying the draft legal act and in preparing the legal regulations**. The benefit was bilateral as the **municipal expertise enriched the debate with the opportunities and problems arising in everyday practice**.

The NAMRB Parliamentary Secretary and representatives at political and expert level participated **regularly in the meetings of Parliamentary committees** advocating the interests of municipalities in deliberation of legal acts important for local government.

Among with the most important examples of active advocacy of municipal interests in the Parliament we **could mention the so called Municipal Constitutional change adopted in 2007**. It provides for the right of municipalities to independently determine the rates of local taxes thus giving them the opportunity to be more independent financially.

Implementing Financial Decentralization in Bulgaria

The way to decentralization – from consensus between municipalities to a compromise with central government

Throughout the years of democratic development of Bulgaria the Government delegated a number of functions and powers to the municipalities.

It should always be kept in mind that decentralization in governance has two sides. On one hand, this was the political will of the central government to transfer its rights and responsibilities to the local government while on other hand are the opportunities and readiness of municipalities to effectively exercise their powers. By that reason the process required **working in a parliament dialogue** and is particularly difficult to apply in countries like Bulgaria that have strong tradition in centralized governance.

Real results could be achieved only if the **municipalities initiated and then also made specific elaborations** of the main directions for change. The citizen's support and public pressure were the other important factor for the success. This is the lesson that NAMRB learnt during the years when the reform was postponed and delayed.

Work organization

Preparation and signing of agreements for cooperation with key ministries and the Council of Ministers, guaranteeing common willingness for joint work for governance decentralization.

Development of common municipal positions on the main directions of change in the field of activity of local government. The discussions forums and round table discussions were generators of ideas imposed by the practice followed by the hardest for each associations stage – **the process of transition from the “big basket” with wishes and expectations to the introduction of actual changes that are possible and applicable in practice**, confirming with the specifics of certain groups of municipalities.

The joint work of experts from municipalities and the central government on determining specific measures and tasks to be implemented is the most difficult part of the way to decentralization. The better equipped the Association’s representatives are for that type of work, the bigger the chances for success. Reaching mutually acceptable solutions inevitably involves concessions and compromises. Otherwise, there was a standing risk that activities were hindered by prolonged arguments, were leading to endless delays in the reform processes.

The adoption of decentralization strategies and agendas by the Council of Ministers and the establishment of an intergovernmental Working group on financial decentralization with its subgroups allowed for the adoption of a Concept and Agenda for Financial Decentralization in 2002 and an Full Decentralization Strategy for the 2006 – 2015 period and a Program for its implementation (2006 – 2009).

Results from the work:

2002 – 2005

- ✎ Allocation of the state transfers to the municipalities based on objective criteria;
- ✎ Transparent and objective mechanism for financial equalization;
- ✎ Separation of municipal responsibilities to state and local concerning the commitment for funding and elaboration of standards for their financing;
- ✎ Providing powers to the municipalities to determine the rates of fees and to administer local taxes;
- ✎ A new legislative framework for municipal debt.

2006 - 2007

- ✎ Change in the Constitution and providing the right to the municipalities to independently determine the rates of local taxes;
- ✎ Significant growth in own revenues;
- ✎ Improved financial status and discipline at local level

Our Successes

2001



- ✚ The Agreement with the Government regulated the priorities of joint work: governance decentralization and financing and preparation of municipalities



for the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union;

- ✚ The concept of financial decentralization gained support not only among municipalities; it also found support among central governance representatives, NGOs and the public;
- ✚ The elaboration of a common municipal position on the necessary changes to be introduced in various areas of municipal activities is under way;
- ✚ Local Governance Guidelines were drafted to be distributed to newly-elected representatives of central governance;
- ✚ The Third Day of Dialogue between legislative and local authorities was held. The major discussion topic was “Expanding the resource capacity of municipal power – an interaction between the Parliament and local authorities”.

2002

- ✚ The Financial Decentralization Strategy and Agenda were adopted with the vital contribution of the NAMRB;
- ✚ The legislative agenda of the NAMBR was adopted;
- ✚ Joint working groups with various Ministries developed projects to introduce amendments to a number of laws;
- ✚ The NAMBR managed to summarize municipal proposals for amendments in all major fields of municipal activities within three months and submitted the summary to the competent government authorities;
- ✚ The Fourth Day of Dialogue between local and legislative authorities took place. The discussions were exclusively focused on financial decentralization and required amendments to the three most important laws, namely, the Municipal Budgets Act, the Local Fees



and Taxes Act and the Municipal Property Act;

- ✍ A special meeting of mayors was held at which an Address to the Council of Ministers, the National Assembly and the citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria was adopted.

2003

- ✍ The process of financial decentralization started;
- ✍ Municipalities were granted the right to independently determine the amounts of local fees;
- ✍ The Amendments and Additions draft bill to the Local Self-governance and Local Administration Act, developed by the Association, was adopted by the Parliament with only a few proposals left out.

2004

- ✍ A special Guideline on “How to defend our cause” was developed to assist municipal representatives in their work in consultative and steering bodies at Ministries and other governmental offices;
- ✍ A 2005 financial framework beneficial for the municipalities was ensured;
- ✍ The support of the International Monetary Fund was ensured to assist in solving issues of municipal budgets;
- ✍ A Cooperation Agreement was signed between the NAMRB and the Chief Tax Directorate concerning collection of property taxes, domestic refuse taxes, vehicles taxes and road taxes in 2004;
- ✍ A meeting between the Prime Minister and the BD of the NAMBR was held to address current municipal issues: developments in the financial decentralization process, transfers of ownership titles to municipalities over state-owned properties not utilized by the central government.

2005

- ✍ An Agreement of Cooperation was signed between the NAMRB and the newly-appointed Council of Ministers;
- ✍ The number of unemployed hired under the municipal project “From social welfare to employment” increased;



- ✍ The activity of the working group involved in developing a Financial Decentralization Strategy and Agenda was resumed;
- ✍ The NAMRB undertook the coordination role between municipalities and competent authorities in the process of overcoming damages incurred by natural disasters;
- ✍ A report on the monitoring of results from the financial decentralization reform was prepared;
- ✍ An Agreement was signed with the Chief Tax Directorate to regulate the manner and procedures of collecting local taxes in order to facilitate the population of small municipalities and the timely collection of resources for municipal budgets;
- ✍ The Fifth Day of Dialogue between local and legislative authorities took place to discuss the topic of “Financial Decentralization: Ways to implement it”.



2006

- ✍ The NAMRB signed a three-years program aimed at efficient interaction with the Ministry of Finance;
- ✍ The NAMRB ensured the creation of a Decentralization Council where central and local authorities participate on a parity principle;
- ✍ The NAMRB and the Council of Ministers signed an annual Agenda to implement the Cooperation Agreement;
- ✍ The NAMRB created a Council to assist municipalities in dire financial circumstances (jointly with the Ministry of Finance);
- ✍ A new Decentralization Strategy and Agenda was developed with the joint efforts of the NAMRB and the central government;
- ✍ A consensus was achieved to accept amendments to the Constitutions to ensure that municipalities are granted the right to independently determine local taxation rates as well as types and amounts of local fees;
- ✍ The NAMRB defended the application of objective criteria for allocating earmarked funds to municipalities;
- ✍ The Sixth Day of Dialogue between local and legislative authorities took place focusing on the discussion topic “The new Mandate of local authorities – with a new legislative framework for the development of local self-governance and decentralization”

2007



- ✦ The NAMRB backed up the successful start of the newly elected municipal authorities by distributing guidelines, consultative papers and providing consultations;
- ✦ A draft bill prepared by the Association for a new Self-Governance Act was submitted with the Parliament. The draft is the result of two years of work and discussions with municipalities, NGOs, the mass media and the public;
- ✦ The amendments to the Constitution to grant the right to municipalities to independently determines local taxation rates as well as the types and amounts of local fees were introduced;
- ✦ The preparation of a new Local Fees and Taxes Act was launched; An arrangement with central government was achieved concerning the development of a Local Finances Act;
- ✦ Representatives of the NAMRB were included in all Monitoring Committees: the National Strategic Reference Framework, the Seven Operational Agendas and the National Plan for the development of rural regions;



Figures and Facts:

- **269 representatives** of NAMRB participate in **131 consultative and steering bodies, working groups** with ministries and other governmental agencies;
- The **additional financial resources** that NAMRB managed to allocate for the municipalities from the state budget are in the amount of **737 mln BGN**.

Wide public understanding and support of local self-governance issues

*Everything in the democratic society begins with the permission
of the public and exists with its approval*

During the years our main task was to inform the public about the necessary reforms and simultaneously seek its support for the changes that will impact the life of each citizen.

The NAMRB efforts were targeted in three directions:

Opening of the municipality to the citizens

This priority is implemented by a number of concrete initiatives:

- ✓ **Improvement of the legal base concerning citizens' participation** – upon NAMRB initiative a number of legal acts guarantee transparency, openness and accountability of municipal activities. Opened were the gates for active citizens' involvement in the decision making process at local level by implementation of public debates on municipal budget, citizens' forums, youth municipal parliaments.
- ✓ **Developing and providing at the beginning of each mandate of a Model Rules of Procedure for the work of municipalities**, that set up the procedure for citizens' participation in the Municipal Council's meetings and its committees as well as the order regulating the interventions of citizens during these meetings, asking questions and receiving answers.
- ✓ **Organization of specialized trainings and meetings for municipal councillors, municipal PRs and administration**, targeted at disseminating experience and best practices for raising citizens' participation. The pilot projects of the Association on transparent and effective management and anticorruption measures became a source of ideas that municipalities put into practice.

Activating citizens' support for the local government

Simultaneously with the process of opening the municipality to the citizens the NAMRB works for raising their awareness of municipal activities.

The NAMRB initiated the celebration of the Day of Bulgarian Municipality every year on 12 October aiming to promote local governance activities and achieving a better public understanding of its role in the development of society. The first Municipal Governance Act was published on 12 October, 125 years ago. Each municipality chooses how to celebrate the holiday and make the citizens aware of local



democracy cause, to award persons that have long-term contribution to the development of their municipality.

NGOs, citizens and media also participate actively in all NAMRB forums and most notably, at the annual Dialogue Day and Annual Conference of Municipalities.

The NAMRB prepares and distributes its publications directly targeted to the citizens: “Who is who in the municipality?”, “Roadmap for citizens to municipal services” and many others.

Media pressure and support to the changes

The increased transparency in the activities of the Association, its pro-active attitude to the mass media and the public will inevitably result in better understanding and positive public response. Thus a trust reserve will be accumulated that could serve in eventual hardships or crisis in municipal circumstances. This is the main lesson derived from our work with the mass media.

The NAMRB learnt this lesson long time ago. The fair and objective information provided to the media concerning problems, difficulties, debates, old and new barriers on the way to decentralization helps to make the journalists our allies and partners that criticize weaknesses yet are capable of strongly supporting reforms.

At special meetings of the NAMRB Board with editors-in-chief and directors of printed and e-media the new priorities that stand before local government were debated as well as the support that the media could provide in these processes.

At the launch of the decentralization process, journalists from regional and national media were invited to attend training seminars where major aspects of the reform were presented and outlined, challenges that stand before municipalities were described as well as areas in which municipalities and media could provide mutual support and act as partners.

In the course of the years the NAMRB eventually gained the status of a center for information not only for the media but also for the municipalities and other institutions. On certain occasions with the support of the media we manage to “exert pressure” to achieve specific results.

An example of public support in one of the difficult stages for the Bulgarian local governance is the symbolic municipal protest organized in the spring of 2003. It ensued from the lack of results in the negotiations with the government and the delay of the decentralization process. All municipalities, trade unions and employees from the budget and the private sector supported the protest while thousands of citizens signed a petition to express their support for the requests of the municipalities. Mass media representatives also supported the protest.

Our Successes

2001 - 2007

- ↪ The BD held a meeting with owners of printed and electronic mass media;
- ↪ In its endeavors to ensure that the financial decentralization process is initiated under favorable circumstances, the NAMRB managed to attract the support of trade unions, NGOs, the mass media and the public.
- ↪ The NAMRB initiated the first “Municipal protest” in modern Bulgarian history. On April 10, 256 municipalities participated in the symbolic municipal protest and 25 thousand citizens signed a petition to express their support for the requests placed by municipalities;
- ↪ The NAMRB made a presentation for the Ambassadors of the member-states of EU and NATO on the successes achieved and issues faced by Bulgarian municipalities in the course of the current municipal mandate.
- ↪ The NAMRB held training seminars for journalists of 5 regional and 1 national mass media;
- ↪ Jointly with New Bulgarian University, the NAMRB held a training seminar on “Interaction between municipal administration and the public. Conflict solution and Crisis management”. 27 employees from 25 municipalities were trained in this seminar;
- ↪ A Memorandum was signed between the CITU, Podkrepa Trade Union and the NAMRB, stating their common concern for the state of the 2003 municipal budgets;



- ↪ A “Journalist of the municipalities” and “Media of the municipalities” award was established to commemorate objective coverage of municipal activities in Bulgaria. The award is given each year at the Annual conference of local authorities;
- ↪ A procession was organized under the slogan “Municipalities against violence”. Over 300 mayors, chairpersons of municipal councils, municipal councilors and employees joined the event.

Figures and facts:

- Over **5,000 publication** in national and regional media;
- **28 Round Tables and discussion forums** with the media, the business and NGOs, involving over 1,500 participants were organized.

Strengthening the administrative and policy-making capacity of local governments

The Association continues to strengthen its reputation of an organization providing adequate training that meets the needs and requirements of municipal staff, as a source of useful information and competent expert-level consultations.

The major source of information on the activities of the NAMRB is the **information bulletin**, issued twice monthly. It reaches more than 1,400 subscribers. Its usefulness is proved by the continuous increase of subscriptions, e.g. from 178 in 2001 to 450 in 2007. The publication is partially financed by sales of advertisement slots according to rates approved by the Board of Directors. So far, revenues from the basic activities of the Association are highly insufficient and the bulletin is financed mostly from revenues under various projects and own funds of the Association. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the number of freely circulated issues should be decreased as opposed to increasing paid subscriptions to help retain the bulletin's image and style. The Internet site of the Association also underwent a drastic change. In 2005 the site was redesigned and new specialized data bases were added to include legislative acts of municipal councils and municipal budgets.

The NAMRB's list of specialized publications also grew: we prepared and distributed a total of 47 guidelines and reference books. In the first months of the new 2003-2007 mandate, each mayor and municipal councilor elected in the country received our "Guidelines for newly-elected mayors and municipal councilors". The publication was highly appreciated by the municipalities. It was a groundbreaking effort since its drafting and preparation was the result of the joint efforts of all partnering organizations which contributed for an improved content and efficient use of allocated financial resources. For the 2007-2011 municipal mandates, the NAMRB prepared a new issue of the Guidelines for newly elected mayors and municipal councilors improving its practical aspects and providing specific useful advices by fields of municipal activities.

Overall, the publishing activity of the Association is determined by current issues faced by municipalities and is driven to meet the information needs on the right topic at the right time.

Successful new approaches were applied by the **NAMRB in its organizational efforts of training events**. For the first time at the beginning of 2006 all municipalities were sent an Annual Training Schedule thus enabling municipalities and their staff to choose among topics they consider significant for their situations and decide on the appropriate time and event to attend.

The Association continues to invest significant resources in training their own trainers, e.g., municipal experts that will then be able to train their peers in other municipalities.

Thus the approach to practice-driven training was achieved which in turn resulted in an increased popularity of training events organized by the NAMRB. We also invite central government experts as speakers and ordinarily these are officials actively involved in the specific topics. Administration of local taxes and fees, internal control, municipal budgets, etc. are the topics that attract the highest degree of attention among prospective attendees. Since 2005, the NAMRB also initiated trainings of chief accountants of municipalities on the process of annual closing of accounts in accordance with the varied needs and requirements of local authorities.

Another successful approach that the Association established as a tradition is the inclusion of training seminars into the Programs of important forums, e.g. General meetings, Annual conferences of local authorities, meetings of financial experts, etc. On the one hand it contributes to the increased usefulness of such forums while on the other, proves to be less time- and resource-consuming. Between 2001 and 2007 over 5,000 municipal councilors and employees participated in 223 training seminars provided by the Association. Training seminars for mayors were organized for the first time and a special edition of the Guidelines was prepared and distributed. The NAMRB further enhanced the practice of organizing **joint training seminars**. Introductory training seminars for newly-elected mayors and municipal councilors were carried out in collaboration with the Foundation for local governance reform, the regional municipal associations, the National Association of Municipal Secretaries and others. Due to joint efforts with various organizations, a large number of seminars on diverse topics and in diverse forms were carried out. The Association provides support to state institutions as well. We have provided assistance to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of the Environment and Waters in carrying out a number of events.

The underlining principle followed by the NAMRB in carrying out its training program is to ensure that training is practice-driven, useful and focused on providing solution to specific issues and needs. In view of that, we are among the few organizations that did not go for a purely theoretic training on accession funds and presentation of functioning programs. The launch of the SAPARD program was accompanied by numerous information campaigns and trainings, yet municipal projects started to spawn following the practical training provided by the NAMRB where clearly defined parameters and criteria of the SAPARD program were presented.

The training activities of the NAMRB underwent a radical change in 2006 when the commercial entity of the Association (NAMRB-Active) was established. Through this company a portion of the training seminars was carried out.

Traditionally, the interest of municipalities in the consultative and expert services provided by the Association, maintains high levels. Statistics prove that a major part of the municipalities have sought the expert advice of the NAMRB when challenged by a

difficult issue in their practice, and most of them have done it numerous times. Providing financial and legal advice constitute the largest amount of the volume of consultative services, followed by consultations on ownership management and labor relationship.

In the area of services provision to municipalities an important factor continued to be the established interaction and collaboration with partnering organizations in other countries. The first meeting of the Joint Committee of the NAMRB and the Committee of the Regions (CoR) of the European Union was held in 2001. In 2005 our representatives obtained the positions of observers and in 2007 became equal members of the Committee of the Regions. We are fully aware that our successful participation depends on our ability to incorporate the issues of Bulgarian municipalities into the common agenda of the European local governance. The NAMRB delegations to the Congress of local and regional authorities at the Council of Europe continued their active contribution. We managed to overcome most of the shortcomings of our work during our previous mandates. Nowadays, a common position is elaborated, responsibilities are distributed and specific tasks are defined prior to participation of our representatives in sessions of these two bodies.

Traditionally successful collaborations with partnering organizations in Europe and the USA were further enhanced. The NAMRB played a major role in the process of strengthening the Network of Local Authorities Associations in Southeast Europe. Currently, the NAMRB maintains strong relations with and relies on the support of over 30 local authorities associations in Europe and worldwide. Within the framework of this interaction over 800 representatives of Bulgarian municipalities enjoyed the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the experience and best practices of foreign local establishments. In the course of the reporting period 49 important forums of respected European organizations were hosted by Bulgaria: the Council of Europe, the Committee of Regions, etc. The NAMRB initiated and supported bilateral contacts between Bulgarian local authorities and local governance bodies from foreign countries. Due to the support of the Twinning Program of the EC, 26 Bulgarian municipalities received financing for events held jointly with their Twin cities. The Association assisted 44 Bulgarian municipalities to find their European counterparts.

Our Successes

2001

- ✎ Round Table “The Children of Bulgaria: shared responsibility between the state and the municipalities”. The event was attended by MPs, representatives of MLSP, municipalities and more than 10 NGOs and central government institutions;
- ✎ A seminar under the heading “Strengthening the position of the NAMRB as a representative and a defender of the interest of local authorities” was organized in collaboration with the Association of Dutch municipalities. This is the first occasion

on which a foreign Prime Minister, Mr. Wim Cook, holds a meeting with representatives of the NAMRB during his visit to Bulgaria;

- ✚ A Discussion forum of Chairpersons of Municipal Councils was held where various forms for a more active participation of municipal councilors in the activities of the NAMRB were outlined.
 - ✚ The Fourth National Conference of Municipal Financial officers was held in Varna. More than 300 financial officers of 150 municipalities attended as well as representatives of the MF, MA, MRDPW, the Chamber of Accounts and foreign experts.
 - ✚ An international conference under the heading “Strengthening of European tendencies in the development of local governance in the Southeastern countries” was held in Sofia. Representatives of 8 national associations reached consensus on a Declaration for mutual cooperation and practically laid the foundation for future networking;
- 
- ✚ A National meeting of chief municipal architects took place in Slanchev briag. It was attended by 120 specialist from more than 90 municipalities, as well as representatives of the CoM, MRDNW, NDCD and others;
 - ✚ The Second meeting of twin cities of Bulgaria and Russia was held in Moscow. More than 50 representatives of 22 Bulgarian municipalities discussed with their Russian partners ways to expand their interaction;
 - ✚ The national celebration of the Day of Bulgarian municipality took place in Varna. The commemoration was devoted to the Charter of European Cities and Towns and was held under the slogan “Towards improved living in our cities”.

2002

- ✚ Within two months, 11 discussion forums were held, aimed at elaborating a common municipal position on changes to be introduced in municipal responsibilities;
- ✚ Bulgarian Municipal Forum within the framework of the 2002 Investment Forum was held. Agricultural, infrastructural and tourism related projects of 13 municipalities were presented.
- ✚ The Fifth National Conference of Municipal Financial officers took place. 310 financial officers of 188 municipalities attended.

- ✍ An International conference commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Charter of European Cities and Towns was hosted in Sofia. The participants analyzed the results achieved by local European authorities in applying its principles;
- ✍ The First Annual Conference of Local Authorities was held. The NAMRB celebrated the Day of the Bulgarian Municipality by organizing a large-scale forum. Over 1,000 municipal representatives attended the forum. Within three days 15 parallel forums were held. NGO's representatives as well as representatives of the business and the media were also invited. This type of forum has grown into a tradition and is held on an annual basis.

2003

- ✍ 11 seminars were held in cooperation with partnering organizations to assist municipalities in adopting their new responsibilities;
- ✍ A special purpose commission within the NAMRB was created to work with small municipalities. A Strategy for strengthening the capacity of small municipalities was adopted;
- ✍ The NAMRB held a discussion Round Table in the town of Karlovo under the heading "A step forward to Europe through changing the Local Governance Act". The forum constituted the concluding stage of a large scale consultations on the major changes in the Local Self-governance and Local Authorities Act;
- ✍ The Annual Conference of Local Authorities was held in Borovets. The NAMRB strategy for sector decentralization was elaborated, i.e. decentralization in the field of education, health care, cultural and social activities;
- ✍ A practical aspects seminar on public measures under the SAPARD Program was organized by the NAMRB and SC Zemdelie (SAPARD Agency). More than 350 municipal representatives attended.



2004

- ✍ 28 seminars for newly-elected municipal councilors and mayors from all municipalities were held. These were organized in collaboration with partnering organizations and had more than 900 attendees. The joint efforts of the NAMRB

and our partners produced the Guidelines for newly elected mayors and municipal councilors”;

- ✧ A conference under the heading “The electronic municipality: at the core of electronic government” was organized in a joint effort with IDG, the FLGR, UNDP, under the aegis of the Minister of State Administration. More than 400 participants in the forum had the opportunity to learn about the practical application of the electronic government concept at the local level, including small municipalities.



- ✧ A series of five seminars aimed at training financial controllers under the heading “The role of the financial controller within the municipal financial management and control”;
- ✧ The International conference “The European Union and local authorities” organized in a joint effort with the Association of Dutch Municipalities was attended by more than 200 municipal representatives;
- ✧ The Seventh National Conference of Municipal Financial officers was attended by more than 260 representatives of a larger portion of the municipalities;
- ✧ Discussion forum of municipal councils’ chairpersons took place in the town of Hissar. It was attended by 140 participants representing 138 municipalities.
- ✧ The 2004 - 2007 Municipal Action Plan for EU accession of Bulgaria was adopted;



- ✧ The Second Annual conference of local authorities was held in Slanchev Briag. More than 15 forums took place, as well as meetings with representatives of local authorities of France and Russia and meetings with two parliamentary commissions.

2005

- ✧ A training session was held under the heading “Local communities and the European Union: distribution of competences and project financing”, jointly with the Assembly of the Departments in France. It was attended by 130 mayors, deputy mayors, chairpersons of municipal councils and other municipal officials from 89 municipalities;
 - ✧ The conference “Municipalities and accession funds: the United Kingdom expertise” in a joint effort with the British Embassy was held to discuss purely practical aspects. The training was attended by 80 mayors, deputy mayors, chairpersons of municipal councils and experts from 53 municipalities;
 - ✧ Discussion forum under the heading “Modernization of high school education: a common concern of the state, the municipalities and the public” was organized in collaboration with Troyan Municipality. Attendees: more than 100 MPs, experts at the MES and MF, headmasters of schools, mayors, municipal councilors and experts, journalists and NGOs.
- 
- ✧ The Eighth National Conference of Municipal Financial officers took place with the attendance of more than 300 representatives of over 130 municipalities;
 - ✧ The Third Annual Conference of Bulgarian Local Authorities took place in Albena, attended by more than 900 representatives of Municipalities, the Prime Minister, 5 ministers, 2 chairpersons of parliamentary commissions, etc.;
 - ✧ The NAMRB raised funds to cover VAT expenses for municipal projects, financed under the SAPARD program;
 - ✧ Four training seminars for mayors of mayorness were held in the towns of Vidin, Biala Slatina, Silistra and Rousse jointly with Association of the Danube municipalities. 160 participants were trained within these seminars;
 - ✧ Discussion forum “Natural disasters in the summer of 2005: conclusions and lessons”. The discussions were organized jointly with the Ministry of State Policy on disasters and accidents and the CPFA of the Parliament. The forum included presentations of opinions and proposals on ways to improve the overall activities

during crisis. Attendants: 80 mayors, deputy mayors, head of directorates, engineering staff, and experts.

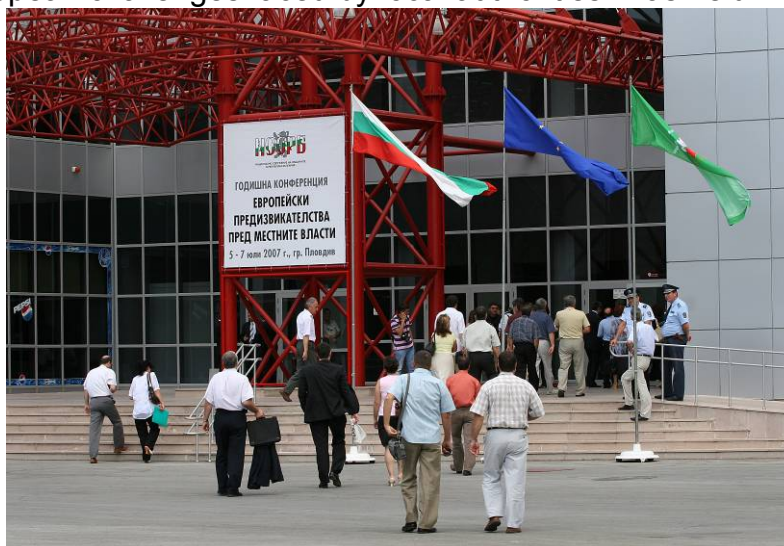
2006

- ✎ A discussion meeting on draft legal bills, related to the reforms in the state financial control and the new powers of local government bodies in local tax administration. The Forum was organized jointly with the Ministry of Finance. It was attended by more than 300 municipal representatives;
- ✎ A discussion forum under the heading “Financial decentralization: a threat or an opportunity for small municipalities?” Over 70 mayors and councilors of small municipalities participated in the debates;
- ✎ DSK Bank and the NAMRB held a seminar to discuss “Utilization of funds disbursed under EU accession funds to municipalities”. The seminar was attended by representatives of more than 100 municipalities;
- ✎ The Ninth National Conference of Municipal Financial officers in the Republic of Bulgaria was held, attracting a record setting number of 470 participants from more than 180 municipalities;
- ✎ Discussion forum devoted to the interaction between the National Directorate of Forestry Management and the municipalities in the sphere of forestry management. The event was attended by 91 representatives of 57 municipalities;
- ✎ The Fourth Annual Conference of local authorities. Most of the key ministries also attended the conference.

2007

- ✎ The NAMRB intervened and helped overcome delays in implementing municipal projects under SAPARD. In reality funds disbursed under the SAPARD program to finance municipal measures were fully utilized;
- ✎ The NAMRB provides active assistance to municipalities to receive finances under the National programs for the development of high school education;
- ✎ The Tenth Anniversary National Conference of municipal financial officers was attended by more than 430 municipal experts. The discussion focused primarily on the new tax powers of local authorities;

- The Annual conference “European challenges faced by local authorities” was held. The forum marked the conclusion of the 2003-2007 mandate and was attended by more than 900 municipal representatives. Municipal servants employed with the municipal authorities for more than 15 years were awarded a badge of honor to celebrate their contribution.



Figures and Facts:

- **223 seminars** were organized with more than **5,000 attendees** from all 264 municipalities;
- **124 issues** of the Information bulletin were published as well as **46 Guidelines and Reference brochures on local governance**;
- **49 international forums** were hosted

Strengthening the self-sustainability, efficiency and institutional capacity of the Association.

The Association persists in its effort to meet the ever increasing expectations of its members and involve as many municipal councilors as possible in its activities. The underlining principle and aspiration is that the results of our work should become palpable for all councilors, mayors and servants of the municipal administration. In 2002 the General Assembly adopted partial changes into the Statute of the NAMRB, thus regulating the rights of the commissions to independently elect their leaders, increased the number of members of the Steering Committee, etc. In 2007 the XVIII General Assembly adopted a **new Statute of the organization** to ensure the participation of local legislative and executive power in the decision-making process as well as the equal representation of municipalities in terms of their geographic locations. The drafting of the new Statute was done through numerous discussions while European expertise and practice were taken into consideration. The new amended Statute will allow the NAMRB to utilize its full capacity and know how in assisting municipalities during the new municipal mandate. Favorable prerequisites to guarantee the organizational sustainability of the NAMRB, apart from the amended Statute, are also the Common strategic plan (2006 – 2013) and the Financial Stability Strategy (2003 – 2010) adopted by the General Assembly.

The NAMRB imposed a working style that relies on **the differential approach to municipalities of different scales and individual approach to the various groups of councilors and employees**. Upon request placed by members, a special commission was set up in 2003 to work with small municipalities. As of today, we can congratulate ourselves with a functional and efficient commission committed to solving issues specific to municipalities of population up to 10 thousand residents. The discussion forum under the heading “Financial decentralization: a threat or an opportunity for the small municipalities” was organized expressly to address the issue of smaller communities.

Depending on the nature of current issues, at the separate stages the Association worked with various groups of municipal experts, e.g. chief architects, financial experts, education experts, social workers, etc. The NAMRB also initiated certain actions to extend the network of voluntary municipal experts. More than 350 municipal councilors and servants expressed their willingness to assist as speakers at various seminars or

participate in the development of researches. We are ready to admit that we did not manage to cover the entire range of municipal positions and jobs and we guess some may feel underestimated. However, we must admit that the Association lacks the capacity and resources to work with some 30 thousand people employed in the local governance system. For example, our constant endeavours to assist the activities of mayors and municipal officials would have been impossible without the cooperation of the regional municipal associations. The NAMRB is open to initiatives and ideas for joint efforts coming from all associations of municipal representatives, to the NGOs, involved in issues that relate to the interests of the local authorities. It is our estimation that coordination between all these bodies needs further improvement. We did not manage to turn into a traditional event the occasional meetings between steering bodies and executive directors, to establish a permanent connection that might have allowed us to function in a network.

Our aspiration towards efficient collaboration is evident in the partnerships achieved in carrying out the Annual conferences of local authorities. Arguably, they will be remembered as the largest and most significant forums, organized by the NAMRB and all partner organizations willing to contribute. In the course of the years four conferences took place and an average of 1,100 municipal representatives participated in them. Each participant was free to choose the event to attend according to its usefulness.

In 2006 the Forum coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Association and that allowed for a wider circle of municipalities and partnering organizations to participate and partake in the atmosphere of our common celebration. The attendants at the events testified to the high position and respect the Association has managed to earn: they were attended by the President of the Republic, the Chairperson of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister, 6 ministers, 3 chairpersons of parliamentary commissions, 8 ambassadors and representatives of donor organizations.

The development of the Association during this period impacted the work of **the Board of Directors**. The Board of Directors has approved more than 2,300 decisions at their sessions. Sessions are held on a monthly basis, occasionally more often. This usually happens in October and November when next year budget negotiations are held. The BD improved the transparency of its work. Apart from the usual Information sheet of the BD, the number of urgent information issues increased as well as other correspondence with municipalities relating to specific issues. **The administrative staff of the NAMRB**

has a defining role in maintaining the constant connection between the BD and the municipalities. We are not in the position to state that the number of the staff increased proportionately to the ever increasing volume of tasks. This results in an increased workload, delegating of additional tasks and short term outsourcing. Nevertheless, the NAMRB's team succeeded to develop, defend and implement 67 projects at a total value of over 2 mln euros that were utilized to carry out important municipal tasks.

We are now in the position to say that during this period we ensured a long-term financial sustainability of the organization.

In 2006 the commercial entity NAMRB-Active was established and within a year it proved as a reliable and welcome partner and consultant to municipalities.

In 2007 the Association completed **two major investments**.

One of the issues of major priority which grew in importance having in mind the constant increase of lease prices in Sofia was successfully solved when the Association acquired its own office space. The office is located in Reduta District in Sofia and has a total built-up area of 824 sq. m. The building has 16 offices, 2 conference rooms, a library with a reading room, storage space and a residential apartment. The Association used own funds to purchase the property. A purchase procedure pursuant to the Public Bids Act was initiated and as a result DSK Bank won the bid having submitted the best offer.

Another major investment was the **rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Training Center in the village of Gergini** (Gabrovo municipality). In 2006 a public bid procedure was initiated for the selection of a subcontractor to carry out the reconstruction works. The actual reconstruction was done in 2007 at a total cost of BGN 908,000, including own funds in the amount of BGN 723,000, while the remaining amount of BGN185,000 was a funded by USAID. The entire facility consists of 3 buildings located on a total area of 7,500 sq. m. The hotel has 37 double rooms, while the training center has 6 seminar rooms seating more than 200 people and is supplied with the necessary equipment. Part of the equipment was donated by the USAID and the MSASR. It is worth noting that due to the significant investments in the training center, the BD of NAMRB requested from the Council of Ministers that the ownership title is transferred to the Association. In July 2007 the title was transferred. The acquisition of ownership rights will allow for the utilization of external financial resources to invest in the further development and operations of the training center.

On October 12, the Day of Bulgarian Municipalities, the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB) officially launched its new training center.

The center was inaugurated by H.E. US Ambassador Mr. John Beyrle and Dr. Krassimir Mirev, Mayor of Targovishte and Chair of the NAMRB Board. The inauguration ceremony was attended by the leaders of USAID – Bulgarian Mr. Michael Fritz and Mr. Kiril Kiryakov, regional governor of Gabrovo, Mayor of Gabrovo and member of the NAMRB Board Mr. Bogomil Belchev, head of department “Administrative-territorial set-up and local self-government” of the MRDPW Mrs. Penka Yordanova, representatives of partner organizations, guests from municipalities and media.

Our Successes

2001

- ✦ The IX General Assembly of the NAMRB was held. The 2001 – 2005 strategic plan was adopted, as well as the annual legislative priorities plan and activities Agenda;
- ✦ The Joint consultative committee between the NAMRB and the EU Committee of the Regions was established;
- ✦ The Declaration to establish the Network of associations of local authorities in Southeast Europe was signed;
- ✦ The NAMRB undertook the role of a secretariat for the Bulgarian delegation to the Congress of local and regional authorities of Europe to the CE.
- ✦ The first forum of representatives of the local authorities associations in Southeast Europe took place;
- ✦ The NAMRB organized a visit for its delegation to NATO’s headquarters;
- ✦ The NAMRB organized training sessions for representatives of Macedonian local authorities;
- ✦ The NAMRB celebrated its 5th anniversary and held its X General Assembly.

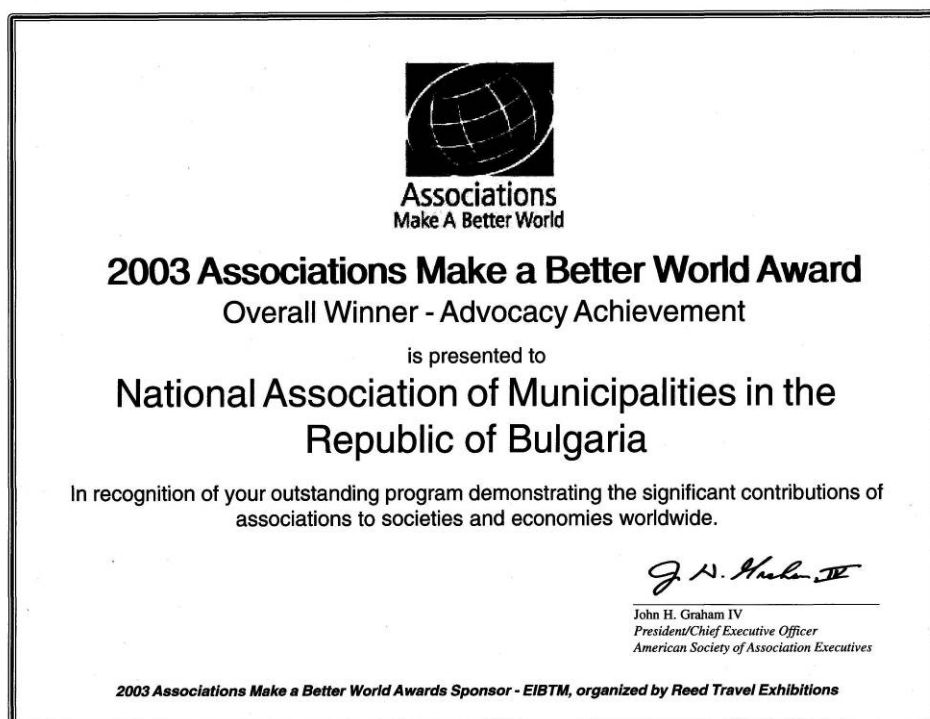
2002

- ✦ The XI General assembly of the NAMRB was held. The assembly analyzed the results from the implementation of the Cooperation Agreement between the NAMRB and the CM, adopted the 2002 – 2004 Legislative Agenda and voted amendments and additions to the Statute of the NAMRB.

- ✍ The NAMRB elaborated and implemented its human resource development strategy;
- ✍ The NAMRB signed a Collaboration agreement with the Association of District Commissioners of South Carolina;
- ✍ The executive director and the Chairperson of the Executive council of the Municipal league in South Carolina visited the NAMRB. During their stay they got acquainted with the work of the Association's team and met with the mayors of 10 municipalities;
- ✍ The first meeting of the coordinators of the Local Authorities associations in Southeast Europe took place where the major priorities in the activities of the Associations' network were outlined.

2003

- ✍ The XII General assembly of the NAMRB was held. The assembly reviewed the 2002 activities report, the NAMRB's 2003 Agenda and the Draft Bill for amendments and additions to the Local self-governance and local administration act;
- ✍ The NAMRB became the first Bulgarian NGO to receive the prestigious American award "To make a better world" for initiating the financial decentralization process;



- ✍ The NAMRB and the Association of cities in the Republic of Ukraine signed an agreement for mutual cooperation and partnership;

- ✧ A joint training session of the Board of Directors and the NAMRB's team was carried out. The NAMRB was assisted by an US consultant to summarize conclusions and lessons derived from the 1993 – 2003 mandate;



- ✧ A training session under the heading “Women in politics” was held for 12 representatives from Albania;
- ✧ The XIII General assembly of the NAMRB was convened. The assembly approved the BD and the CC activities report for the 1993 – 2003 mandate. The assembly elaborated an appeal addressed to municipal councilors and mayors to be elected for the upcoming mandate.

2004

- ✧ The XIV General Assembly of the NAMRB was convened. The assembly elected the members to the Association's steering bodies for the 2003 – 2007 mandate;

- ✧ The second session of the Joint consultative committee between the NAMRB and the Committee of the Regions was held in Brussels;



- ✧ A special mission of the Assembly of

departments in France visited Bulgaria having as its main task to establish contacts and discuss specific opportunities for interaction between local authorities in the two countries;

- ✚ The XV General Assembly of the NAMRB was convened. The assembly adopted 2004 – 2007 Municipal action plan for the Bulgarian accession to the EU. The number of members of the BD was increased from 19 to 21;
- ✚ Lobbying training sessions for the NAMRB's representatives in steering and consultative bodies to Ministries and governmental agencies "Ways to defend our cause". Over 70 participants underwent this training.

2005

- ✚ The General meeting of the Network of Associations of Local authorities in Southeast Europe was held. A new statute of the network was adopted: Rules and a strategic plan (2004 – 2007). The steering bodies of the Network were elected.
- ✚ The executive director of the NAMRB was elected executive director of the Network of Associations of Local authorities in Southeast Europe;

- ✚ The XVI General Assembly of the NAMRB was convened. The 2005 Activities Agenda was approved;



- ✚ The Fifth meeting of the Joint consultative committee between the NAMRB and the Committee of the Regions was held. The committee approved instructions on "Sustainable development and protection of the environment" and "Policy and strategy for the utilization of accession funds".
- ✚ The BD of the NAMRB approved and distributed an Address to mayors and municipal councilors of municipalities sustaining damages from natural disasters;

- ✚ The NAMRB created a temporary team in charge of coordinating the activities related to overcoming damages from recent floods. The team collected information from municipalities on the scale of such damages. It ensured coordination between the competent authorities and donors to assist the municipalities in direst needs.

2006

- ✚ The XVII General assembly of the NAMRB took place. The assembly established active dialogue with ministers and the President of the Republic of Bulgaria;
- ✚ The 2006 – 2013 strategy for financial self-sustainability of the Association was elaborated and implemented;
- ✚ The commercial activities of the the NAMRB – Active were launched. The purpose behind its establishment is to ensure that municipalities receive high-quality services at competitive prices;
- ✚ The procedure to open an NAMRB office In Brussels is initiated;
- ✚ The NAMRB acquired and started equipping its own Training center.



2007

- ✚ The XVIII General Assembly of the NAMRB is convened. The assembly adopts amendments to the Statute of the organization to guarantee representations of the two bodies of local governance, i.e. the mayor and the municipal council, in the bodies of the Association. Democratic procedures are introduced to allow for the involvement of the Association's activities of a wider range of municipal councilors and servants;
- ✚ The NAMRB, being an organization in a member-state of the European Union, organized training seminars for municipal councilors from Armenia;
- ✚ The Chairperson of the Committee of the Regions participated in a session of the Board of Directors of the NAMRB;

- ✚ The Association launched its own office and training center for local authorities.



Figures and facts:

- **10 sessions** of the General assembly and **81 sessions** of the Board of Directors;
- **7 training sessions** organized by the NAMRB's team;
- From 2001 to 2006 the administrative team of the Association **increased by 25%**;
- The NAMRB successfully implemented **67 projects** financed by external grants.

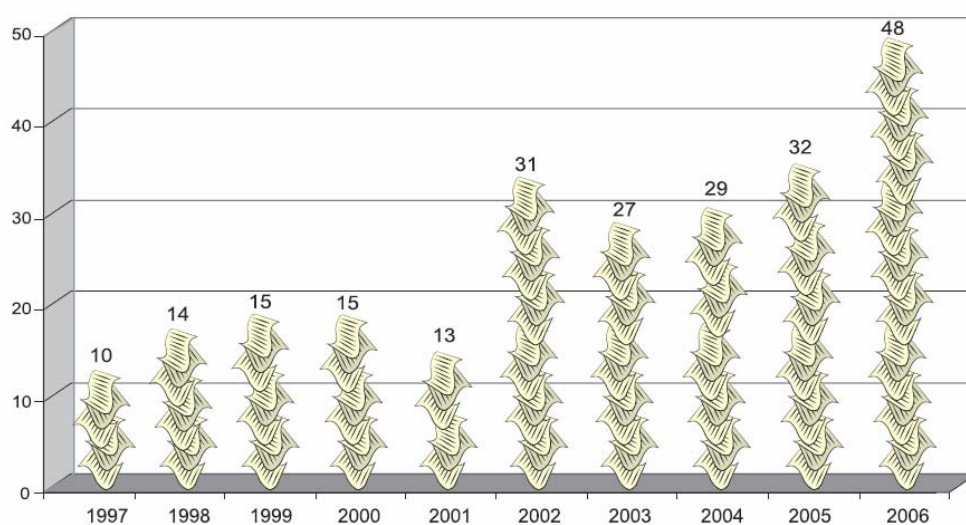
Contribution to the program objectives and evaluation criteria

During the period of the grant, NAMRB achieved considerable successes and fulfilled over 95 % of the evaluation criteria.

The experience and professional skills of the members and the personnel increased in the course of implementation of the program.

A general review of legislation efforts for the period 2001 – 2007 shows that the most significant changes and amendments were introduced in the Municipal Property Act, The Municipal Budgets Act, the Local Fees and Taxes Act, the Corporate Taxation Act. The NAMRB participated actively in the process of drafting and adopting these laws. The Association played a key role in the process of elaborating the Municipal Debt Act as well as the positive changes introduced in the annual acts on the state budget. For the entire period, the Association came up with opinions and statements on a total of 47 draft bills, 12 national programs and strategies, and over 70 drafts on secondary legislation.

Number of opinions stated by the NAMRB on draft legal acts, Constitutional court cases and other

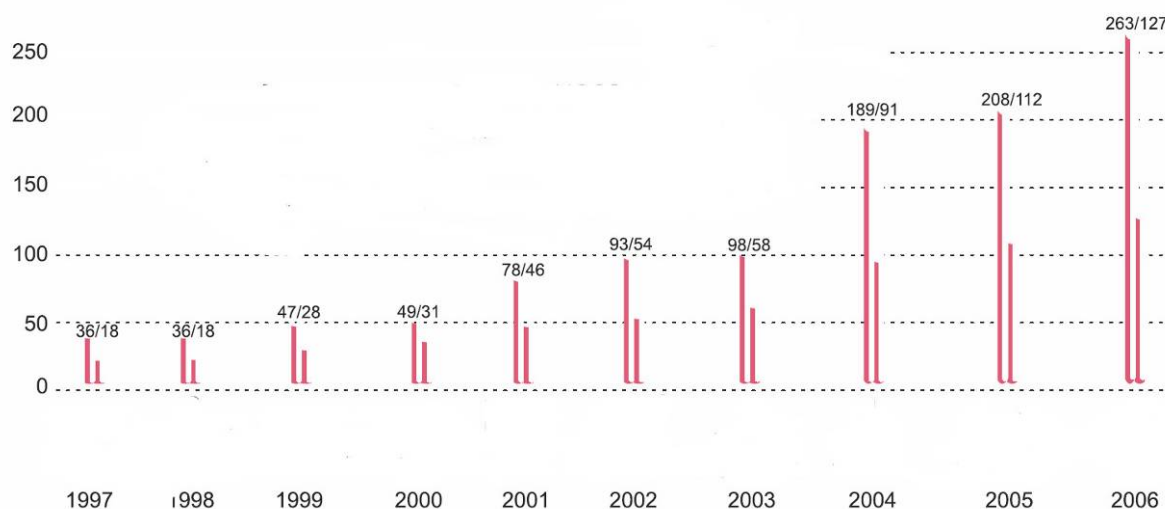


Simultaneously the NAMRB invested significant efforts and resources to achieve the introductions of amendments in the Constituion and to prepare a radically new Local self-governance Act. The NAMRB now has their opinions on amendments to the Local Fees and Taxes Act ensuing from the above-mentioned amendments. The draft bill for a new Self-governance Act is taking its final shape following two years of work.

A sustainable interaction between central and local authorities was developed. The scope of municipal representation in central government bodies widened, so that by the

end of the grant NAMRB representatives were already included in 131 bodies and joint working groups.

Number of the NAMRB's representatives, involved in the work of steering and consultative bodies at Ministries and other governmental agencies, working groups, etc



The forms of dialogue between central and local authorities have been constantly enriched, leading to increased efficiency. Representatives of the Association took part in more than 80% of the meetings of the Commission on Local Self Governance, Regional Policy and Public Works of the National Assembly. The Day of Dialogue between legislative and local authorities took place simultaneously in 28 regional centers in the country with more than 950 participants each year.

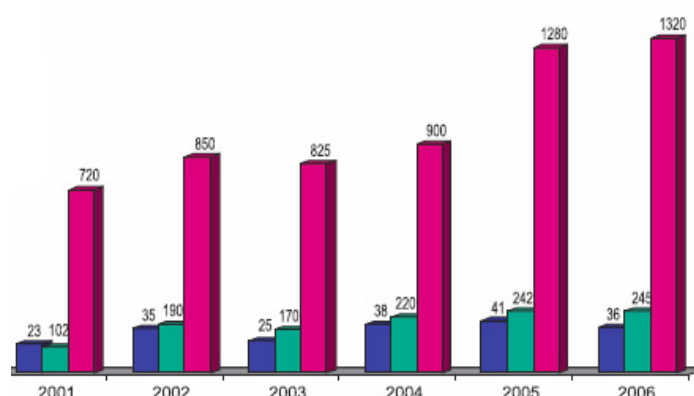
The Association also enlarged its activities relating to the provision of services to its members.

223 qualification seminars and courses were held, attended by more than 5,000 municipal servants. The members also meet the NAMRB publications with great interest.

■ ***Number of training sessions;***

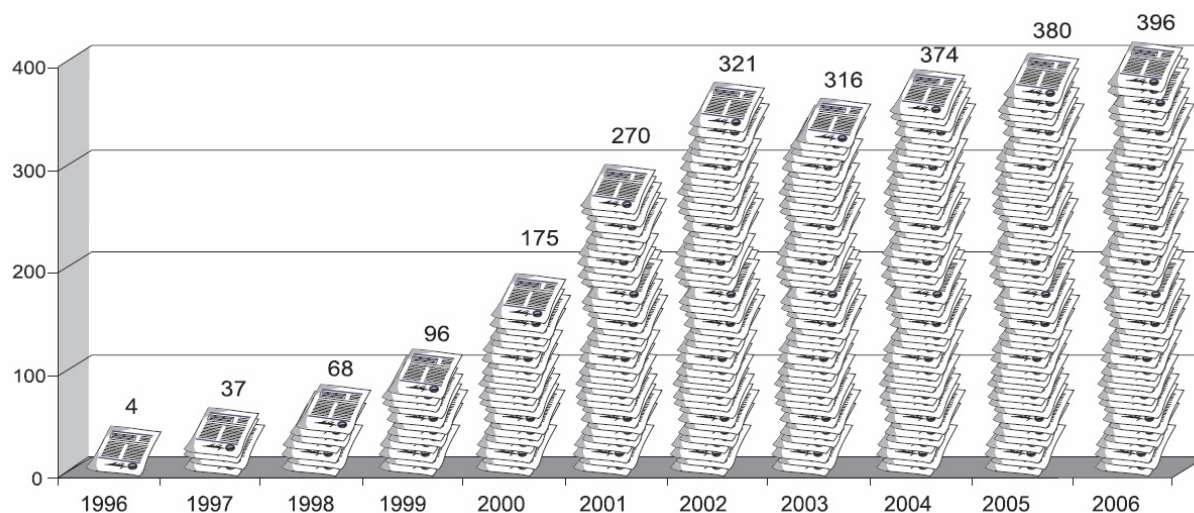
■ ***Number of trained municipalities;***

■ ***Number of trained experts;***



The information bulletin reaches over 1,400 subscribers from local and central governance authorities. The applications for paid subscriptions are also on the rise, amounting nowadays to a total of 450.

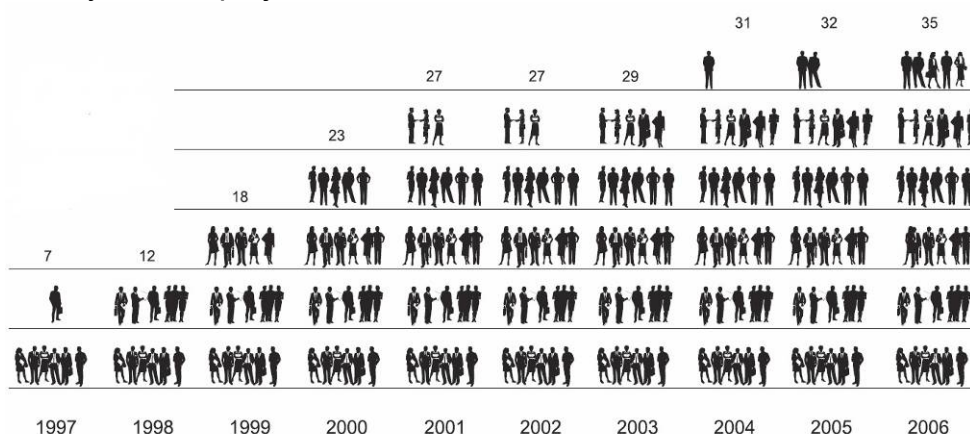
The capacity of the organization, guaranteeing its sustainable development, has increased considerably. Its steering bodies meet on a regular basis - 81 meetings of the Board of Directors, the Control Council were held, where over 2300 decisions were taken.

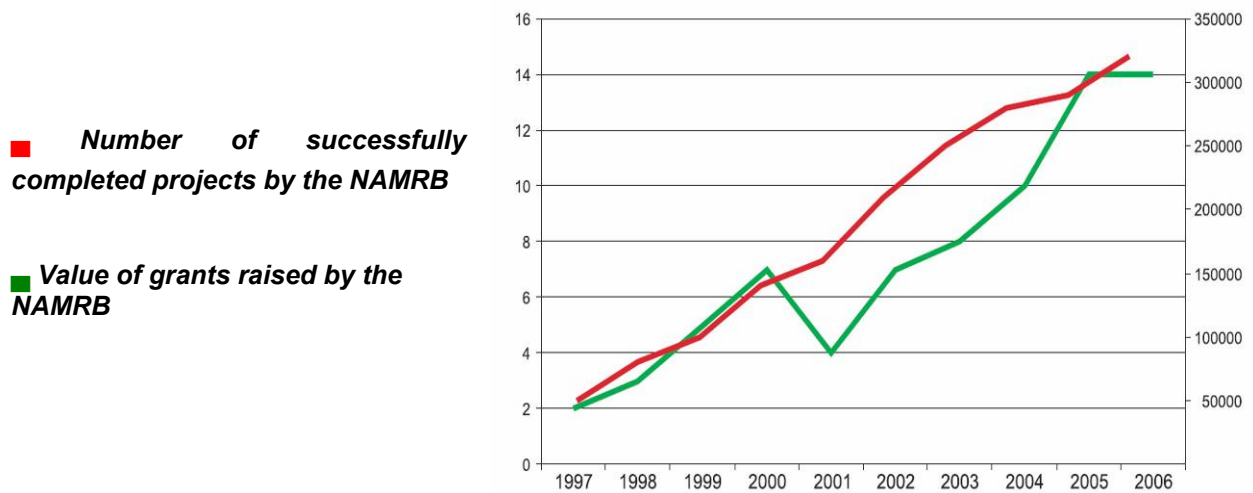


Number of decisions adopted by the Board of Directors

Thanks to the concise procedures for the elaboration of common positions of municipalities, the opinions and proposals of the specialized commissions, submitted to the Board of Directors and the General Assembly, are approved without substantive remarks and changes. The decisions of the Board of Directors are being published in a special edition - the Information sheet of the Board - and are sent to the municipalities immediately after every meeting. Existing relations with partner organization in the country and abroad are consistently developed and contacts with new partners are being established. Today, the Association is operating in a partnership network with 50 Bulgarian and over 30 foreign organizations and has completed 23 joint projects with them.

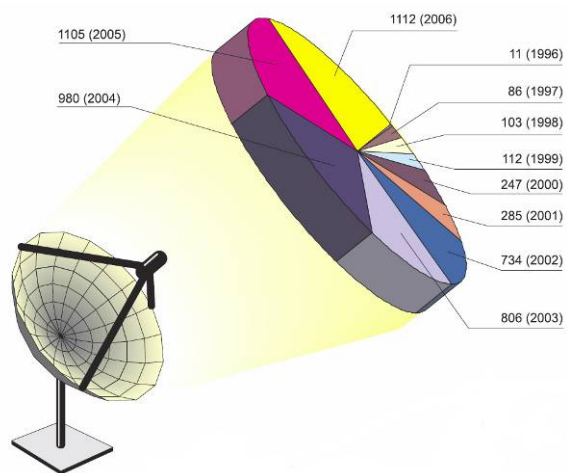
The NAMRB's team has increased with a mere 25% over these years, yet we managed to develop, defend and carry out 67 projects at a total value of over 2 mln euros, that were utilized to implement tasks of significant importance for the municipalities.





The NAMRB since its establishment eleven years after has won recognition as financially sustainable organization, so its own revenues from the budget has increased gradually from 10% in 1997 to 75% in 2007.

The media presence of the organization also testifies to its improved image



and place in society. For the period of the grant, the Association's activities have been the subject of over 5,000 articles and broadcasts in national media, 85% of which were supportive and approving.

Number of publications and participations in national and regional mass media

Lessons learned

NAMRB work for the achievement of the grant objectives led to the following major conclusions and lessons:

- ❑ NAMRB can maintain and enhance its authority and image only if it completely satisfies the demands of its members, which are mainly about:
- ❑ Making real changes in the legislative basis of local self-governance and the development of financial decentralization;
- ❑ Taking action on all individual requests for expert services, training, information and other.

The main lessons learned in the area of interaction with central authorities are the following:

- ✎ For the formulation of consensus proposals, NAMRB should not only apply consistently internal democratic procedures for the elaboration of common positions, but also stimulate its members and representatives to take an active stand when defending these positions;
- ✎ There is much bigger chance to have the proposals of municipalities accounted for, when municipal experts are involved in the drafting of legal acts at the earliest possible stage - for example in the working groups of the ministries, which develop the respective drafts;
- ✎ The achieved level of representation of municipalities in important spheres is high enough. At this stage, more attention should be paid to the right choice of representatives and the effective defense of common municipal interests.
- ❑ High quality and timely services can be provided to members only if qualified own experts and sufficient financial resources are available. The mutual help that experts from different municipalities give each other already on a regular basis, is bringing about positive results.
- ❑ The good coordination of activities with partner organizations makes possible to attain the results with less human and financial resources. The experience from joint fora, publications, planning activities, etc. indicates that duplication of efforts is avoided and more efficient use of financial means is assured in this way.
- ❑ A larger number of municipalities and different categories of municipal representatives should be involved in the everyday work of the organization. It is necessary that NAMRB applies a differentiated approach to municipal councilors and municipal experts - financial officers, chief architects and other.

- The shortest way to get public understanding and support for NAMRB activities is through the media. It is important in this connection to maintain permanent contacts and cooperate with journalists that deal with municipal issues.

The Association is strong with the taken by the practice Municipal EXPERTISE and lasting PARTNERSHIPS inside and abroad.

The reforms are accelerated when the Association invests in dissemination of BEST PRACTICES, building of a municipal CAPACITY and encouraging of municipal COOPERATION and COMPETITIVENESS.

For implementation of a real decentralization it has to be worked in an environment of permanent “PRESSURE” by media, NGOs and citizens

The general conclusion, which can be drawn from NAMRB experience in implementing the grant, is that the organization has the capacity to generate a new type of dialogue with central authorities and the society as a whole.

The principles of dialogue and partnership which form the basis of its overall activity, help the Association in its efforts to stimulate such changes in society, which will guarantee effective interaction and mutual respect among the different players - state, municipalities, business circles, non-governmental organizations, the media.